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ABSTRACT

This study examined preservice teachers', cooperating teachers', and teacher educators' definitions and understandings of accountability in teacher education. Respondents at three universities completed surveys that included both selected and open-ended response items. Data analysis indicated that nearly 80 percent of the respondents believed they understood the term accountability, and 67.2 percent of them thought accountability measures benefited educators and improved teaching and learning. About 91 percent of respondents considered themselves accountable to people within their teacher education programs and required to provide evidence of their competence to these people, though they were unclear about the type of evidence they should provide. About 78 percent of respondents believed they were accountable to people outside their teacher education programs and that they were required to provide evidence of their competence to people outside these programs. At all three institutions, participants generally felt that they understood and valued accountability and were aware of groups to which they accountable. There was a level of confidence in the worth of accountability and recognition of the pressures resulting from it. (SM)

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Three views of accountability from the trenches: What does it mean? What is its value?

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Overview

This executive summary provides information about a pilot study on accountability that we conducted this year. This pilot study is not exhaustive by any means. However, it does give us some interesting insights into what preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and teacher educators think and believe about accountability in teacher education. We have conducted an analysis of the aggregated selected response data and an analysis of disaggregated data from the open-ended responses at the three institutions. We intend to further analyze the disaggregated select response data in an effort to get a broad perspective of accountability from those we believe are most directly affected by the measures.

Introduction

Accountability was chosen as the primary means for reforming education (Cibulka, 1999), and such reform involves a wide array of stakeholders. The concept of accountability in teacher education follows closely on the heels of accountability efforts in public education, which sought to address concerns by the public about teacher training and quality (Littleton, 2000). Stakeholders at all levels wanted to have some way of gauging the effectiveness of teacher education programs and thus the quality of classroom teachers. In response, the National Council on the Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) developed standards for quality in teacher education programs. These standards, while voluntary, are important signifiers of quality to the larger public, especially funding groups such as legislatures and grant sources. Such accreditation helps the evaluation of teacher education programs in general ways. However, we are not yet clear about how specific stakeholders within these programs understand accountability as accreditation groups and reform efforts outline it.

Transforming the manner in which we educate teachers is at the heart of several reform groups: NCATE, The Holmes Group, and The Renaissance Group, and others (Valli & Rennert-Ariev, 2000). Developed within the academy, these reform efforts provide differing approaches to accountability in teacher education, but all claim to focus on improving quality and measuring preparation against specific standards. Conversations with those in the trenches (preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and teacher educators) indicate that they may or may not have clear understandings about "accountability" as it relates to the specific reform group with which their programs are aligned. In addition, definitions and values may vary significantly among teacher education programs

In theory, it is difficult to argue against the concept of accountability in teacher education. In practice, there is no consensus as to what "accountability" means and/or involves. As Guthrie (1999) points out, while we are learning more about the ways that people learn, this knowledge "does not yet translate easily into a science of teaching" for which teachers are held accountable (p. 365). Guthrie provides a litmus test, reminding us that teachers are "almost never sued or dismissed for instructional malpractice. What standard could be applied that would hold up in court?" (p. 362). The limited information about consistent definitions of accountability is troublesome for all stakeholders in educational reform efforts. In addition, many policy makers and legislators do not view the voluntary nature of accreditation systems such as NCATE as "true accountability" (Littleton, 2000). As a result, voluntary accreditation of teacher education programs is currently being replaced and/or augmented by state-imposed regulations, thus adding another layer of potentially conflicting definitions and expectations.

In the absence of consistently understood definitions, teachers at all levels often create their own. Educators from postsecondary to kindergarten note that, "When I close my classroom

door, I can do what I want." In spite of occasional evaluative visits by principals or accrediting organizations, that statement goes largely unchallenged. As a result of this history of autonomy, many educators have developed very individualistic understandings about accountability. It is time we attempted to find common themes across definitions in an effort to clarify the concept of accountability in teacher education. Even more important, understanding how we *define* accountability may help also us develop programs where such accountability is *valued*.

Methods

We designed a survey questionnaire as part of a pilot study to determine preservice teachers', cooperating teachers', and teacher educators' definitions and understandings of accountability in teacher education. The survey contained 14 selected response items and seven open-ended questions. Four selected response items asked for basic demographic data – classification, grade level at which they work, gender, and teacher education program with which they work. 10 selected response items asked teachers to respond to specific questions about accountability on a five-point Likert scale. The open-ended questions asked for definitions of and words associated with "accountability," groups thought to hold them accountable, evidence they are expected to produce, benefits and pitfalls to accountability, personal impact of issues in accountability, and educational organizations to which they belong.

Preliminary Insights

Selected response data

Based on the aggregated data, an overwhelming number (76.9%) of preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and teacher educators believed they understand the term "accountability," and 67.2% of them thought accountability measures provide benefits to educators. There was

also agreement that strong accountability supports improvements in both teaching (70.7%) and learning (70.6%).

On a more focused level, 90.9% of the respondents thought they are accountable to people within their teacher education programs and a similar percentage (84%) believed they are required to provide evidence of their competence to people within these programs. Yet there seemed to be a disconnect when respondents were asked for details about the evidence they need to provide; merely 53.9% were clear as to what evidence they need to provide to support their competence.

A smaller number of respondents (77.7%) believed they are accountable to people outside their teacher education programs and that they are required to provide evidence of their competence to these outside people (60.2%). However, only 40.6% were clear as to what this evidence entails.

Open-ended response data

In general, the quantitative results from the three institutions were much the same. Participants generally felt they understood and valued accountability and were aware of groups to which they were accountable. There was a general level of confidence in the worth of accountability and recognition of the pressures resulting from it.

College/University #1. Preservice teachers defined their accountability primarily in terms of "responsibility", the most frequently recurring term. Many of their comments stressed the individual nature of accountability, often stated using first person pronouns. "We are responsible for students' learning," "…I am responsible for students' growth and learning," " Being able to prove I did my job." They also used terms such as "dependable," "prove," and "demonstrating." Preservice teachers saw themselves as directly accountable to those with whom they were in

immediate contact: students, professors, cooperating teachers, and sometimes parents. Several preservice teachers mentioned "the state" but not one of them named any organizations or national governing bodies. When asked to identify required evidence of their accountability, many students drew a blank and gave no response or wrote that they did "not know of any." They were, however, able to list a wide variety of benefits and pitfalls of accountability, and these responses contained no immediately discernible pattern. When asked "What impact, if any, do issues of accountability have on you in the context of teacher education?" more than half the preservice teachers gave no response at all. Certainly their answers were not informed by connections with professional teaching organizations, as only two of them listed off-campus education affiliations.

Cooperating teachers also used "responsibility" as a major component of their understanding of accountability. Their definitions, however, combined this word with others like "justify," "explain," and "meeting the minimum set of requirements." The definitions of this group showed a clear awareness of expectations established by those outside their classrooms, especially parents and "the public." The variation among responses increased when cooperating teachers were asked to identify "evidence of accountability, as well as benefits, pitfalls, and impact. Cooperating teachers, like preservice teachers, were affiliated with few professional organizations, although most belonged to the state and national education associations.

Like preservice teachers and cooperating teachers, teacher educators referred to "responsibility" most frequently in their definitions of accountability. Although a few of them noted that they were accountable to groups at the state and national levels ("learned societies," "stakeholders," "national standards"), most were concerned with their immediate constituents: preservice teachers, cooperating teachers, and their department. This group was most specific

about the tangible nature of evidence, which included "portfolios," "artifacts," "data," and—mentioned for the first time by any group—"state and national reports." They were also the most forceful in stating the benefits of accountability and about half of them used the term "quality" in expressing their support this expectation. Their expression of "pitfalls" was far more varied, however, and the primary pattern in their answers had to do with the potential over-reliance on tests. The responses to the question about the "impact" of accountability were also very individualistic but indicated a general concern about the very great difficulties educators face and the fear that accountability might overshadow more important learning endeavors. As might be expected, this group had a wide range of professional and academic affiliations, averaging more than four each for full-time faculty.

College/ University #2. Preservice teachers compiled an exhaustive list of words that they associate with "accountability." The most often mentioned words were "responsibility," "reliability," and "knowledge." Preservice teachers also listed words and phrases such as "standards" and "standardized tests," "ownership of actions," and "answering to someone." More detailed comments included "making sure you are doing your job and students are not falling through the cracks" and "a term so broad that it is a buzzword."

When it came to identifying people or groups to whom they are accountable, preservice teachers most often named those within the school context (e.g., students, faculty, administrators), followed by those in the college/university context (e.g., professors, peers, advisors). Very few mentioned being accountable to state and/or licensing bodies. The evidence that preservice teachers believe they must provide was almost exclusively related to college/university settings and surprisingly, the state. Such evidence included "standardized tests," "assignments," "journals," "portfolios," and "completion of required courses." Out of the

approximately 85 written responses, only two seemed related to the school setting. These were "the need to ensure a future employer of competence" and "to participate in parent-teacher conferences."

Preservice teachers were quite prolific when it came to examining benefits and pitfalls to accountability. "Providing guidance" or "goals" were a common theme among these responses as was the idea of "holding teachers responsible for their knowledge and skills in the classroom." One preservice teacher even noted that it might "give teachers a certain degree of respect." Pitfalls identified by preservice teachers focused on the stress associated with being held accountable for things that are often beyond their control and concerns about whether accountability measures focus on "the right things."

The responses to the question about the "impact" of accountability were confusing at best, seemingly incomplete or unrelated to the question ("an enormous impact-I want to do the best job that I can," and "the dedication to students and teaching"). In addition, one-third of the preservice teachers left the question blank, wrote "I don't know" or "NA." As with most preservice teachers, only a few listed membership in select state-level professional organizations.

Cooperating teachers who work with this *College/University* are widely dispersed and not readily accessible. As such, there are no responses from them at this time.

Like preservice teachers, teacher educators mentioned "responsible" most frequently in their definitions of accountability. They generated an inclusive list of people or groups to whom they believe they are accountable, e.g., "K-12 teachers," "students," "colleagues," and "university administration." Only one person mentioned being held accountable to "accrediting bodies." This said, the "evidence" that teacher educators believe they must provide focused almost exclusively on items related to ensuring personal promotion and tenure. Only one teacher

educator mentioned providing evidence to their students, and one declared "not much after tenure."

This group generated relatively few "benefits" to accountability, e.g., clarifying expectations and "establishing minimum standards of performance." The "pitfalls," however, were more numerous. Teacher educators were extremely concerned with the appropriateness or accuracy of many accountability measures. For example, they were concerned because they believe there are "varying perceptions of effective," "many things [teachers] do are not quantifiable," and there seems to be a "focus on end results rather than teaching."

The teacher educators were also fairly pessimistic in their responses to the query about the "impact" of accountability. Here again, some saw a significant impact "with retention, tenure, and promotion." Still others were concerned about the time commitment to "paperwork/busywork for others," and were highly resistant to standardized testing. One teacher educator did mention that accountability supports personal reflection and can "force better record-keeping and [the collection of] more reliable information." As far as memberships, these teacher educators were similar to those at the other institutions, belonging to several national education and content-specific organizations.

College/University #3. "Responsible," "dependable," and "reliable" were the most frequently mentioned one-word descriptors regarding accountability that preservice teachers listed. They saw themselves being accountable to those in the school in which they were student teaching (e.g., students, parents, their cooperating teacher, administrators and other faculty members) as well as those in the university community (e.g., university supervisors and professors). However, a few preservice educators listed the "board of education," "the state licensure board" and "the state" as external entities to which they are accountable. The evidence

that preservice educators believe they need to provide include "lesson plans," "reflections," and both "formal and informal assessment." They believe they need to provide this information to those most immediately involved with their student teaching experiences and supervision (i.e., cooperating teacher, university supervisor, school administrator).

Concerning the benefits and pitfalls of accountability, the preservice teachers presented a plethora of ideas. A frequently mentioned benefit was that "educators take responsibility for student learning." Giving evidence of student learning was also frequently mentioned as a benefit. Most frequently mentioned pitfalls of accountability were "time consuming paper work" and the fact that "it may cause unfavorable changes in curriculum as teachers teach to the test." These preservice teachers listed membership in several professional organizations, which may have informed their responses to the survey. These organizations were primarily at the local and state levels.

Cooperating teachers had a wide range of responses when asked to define accountability. But overwhelmingly, the most frequent response referred to their "responsibility to their students" and to "demonstrating that they are teaching what they are required to teach." These cooperating teachers see "parents," "students," "the community (taxpayers)," "colleagues" and "the university supervisor who works with the student teachers in their classrooms" as the primary people to whom they are accountable. As far as evidence of their accountability, "test scores" and "benchmarks" were the most frequently mentioned responses. They also stated they must "report to building administrators, matching goals and objectives with year-end reports."

Cooperating teachers identified a variety of benefits of accountability, but the most frequent response was "clear expectations." Another benefit mentioned was that accountability helps "make educators aware of areas for improvement" and "encourages practitioners to be

reflective." Concerning pitfalls, they stated that "paper work" and "reporting of accountability indicators" were a time consuming as well as overwhelming responsibility. Several were concerned that those not in education set the rules for accountability. One respondent went so far as to claim that "educators are accountable to more people than any other profession."

Cooperating teachers stated that accountability impacts teacher education by bringing issues to the fore that cause constant change and help to keep the curriculum current. One note of interest is that one-third of the respondents choose not to respond to this question on the survey. The cooperating teachers listed membership in a variety of professional organizations at the local and state levels. A few national professional organizations were mentioned, and one-fourth of the respondents indicated they belonged to no professional organizations.

Teacher educators compiled an extensive list of words that they associate with accountability, including "responsibility," "integrity," "honesty, "and "mastery." Phrases such as, "demonstrating competence," and "proving outcomes are met." Teacher educators stated that they are accountable to their "students," "department chair and the hierarchy of the university administration," "taxpayers or the public at large," "colleagues" and "school administrators where student teachers are placed." Evidence of accountability included "year-end reports," "student and cooperating teacher assessments" and the syllabi that they are required to provide.

Benefits of accountability were listed as "helping keep your professional focus," "credibility," and "evidence that I am doing my job." Pitfalls as viewed by the teacher educators included statements like, "it's difficult to measure true learning solely with paper/pencil information," "it often does not allow for diverse learners" and "it can become too narrow in its focus." In considering the impact on teacher education, respondents were concerned that it is being "over emphasized," and that "accountability is perceived as synonymous with standardized

tests." Teacher educators, as with those at the other two institutions, listed membership in numerous professional organizations.

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